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ABSTRACT

This report examines the problem of the pervasiveness of politics in today's higher education, particularly in the humanities, and argues the need for college and university campuses to return to seeking the truth and telling it rather than straying into the position that the aim of education is for students to become politically transformed. Too often, it is argued, classrooms are being used to advance a political agenda, and for students to resist such efforts in teaching often means to risk ostracism both by their classmates and their professors. The report stresses that seeking higher standards of human endeavor is no longer as important as politically correct thinking. Academic freedom is being transformed to the point where the expression of controversial views (i.e., views differing from those being inculcated by the instructor) now comes with a high social cost; on campus and off, truth is seen as nothing more than different perspectives being advanced by different people to promote their own interests. It is feared that the time is quickly coming where students who are presented with tendentious interpretations of historical events or persons may not know enough to object. The report highlights some of the efforts that have been and are being taken in defense of free speech and academic freedom on college campuses and concludes with a discussion of the role of trustees and administrators in exerting influence to reverse the trend toward infusing doctrinaire politics into teaching. (GLR)

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TELLING THE TRUTH

We are not afraid
to follow truth wherever
it may lead, nor to tolerate
any error so long as reason
is left free to combat it.

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TELLING THE TRUTH

September 1992

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

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TELLING THE TRUTH

UNTIL A FEW YEARS AGO, almost everyone agreed that while our schools might not be performing as well as they should, our colleges and universities were institutions we could point to with pride. Now, however, there is growing awareness that our colleges and universities are in trouble. In recent years, there has been a flood of books and articles about how higher education has lost its way. People from across the political spectrum have been speaking out; and from their many critiques, one theme of particular importance emerges: the way in which higher education, especially in the humanities, has become politicized. In a 1991 address, Benno Schmidt, then president of Yale University, warned that "universities have become saturated with politics, often of a fiercely partisan kind." Said Schmidt:

> The most serious problems of freedom of expression in our society today exist on our campuses . . . . The assumption seems to be that the purpose of education is to induce correct opinion rather than to search for wisdom and to liberate the mind.[1]

In his last report to the Board of Overseers, retiring Harvard president Derek Bok warned, "What universities can and must resist are deliberate, overt attempts to impose orthodoxy and

suppress dissent." Added Bok, "In recent years, the threat of orthodoxy has come primarily from within rather than outside the university."[3]

Some maintain that this problem has been exaggerated. A newly organized group of professors accuses "a vociferous band of critics" of making "false claims" and waging a "campaign of harassment and misrepresentation."[4] Those who have spoken out, however, are not people given to making careless charges. They include not only university presidents Schmidt and Bok, but also distinguished scholars such as historians Eugene D. Genovese, C. Vann Woodward, and Gertrude Himmelfarb, and philosophers Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Searle.[5] It is important to note that there is still excellent research being done on our campuses and much thoughtful teaching; but there are also many examples of teaching and learning being put into the service of politics, particularly in the humanities. As this report shows, colleges and universities in every part of the country have been affected; and to ignore this phenomenon or to be less than candid about it discourages remedy for it. Speaking out frankly—telling the truth—encourages remedy, in part by providing support for the administrators, faculty members, alumni, and students who are working to maintain the integrity of their colleges and universities.

"The university function is the truth-function," philosopher John Dewey declared at the turn of the century.

This report is also about a second kind of truth-telling: the effort to discover the truth. Long the goal of our colleges and universities, this aim is enshrined in mottos: *veritas* at Harvard, *lux et veritas* at Yale and Indiana Universities, *quaecumque sunt vera* at Northwestern. "The university function is the truth-function," philosopher John Dewey declared at the turn of the century;[6] and for decades educators have affirmed the idea that higher education should be about seeking evidence, evaluating it critically, weighing conflicting opinions—about trying to tell what is true. But this aim is

frequently derided today. An increasingly influential view is that there is no truth to tell: What we think of as truth is merely a cultural construct, serving to empower some and oppress others. Since power and politics are part of every quest for knowledge—so it is argued—professors are perfectly justified in using the classroom to advance political agendas. Campus authorities, liberated from old-fashioned notions that ideas should be allowed freely to clash and compete, are justified in restricting speech. The aim of education, as many on our campuses now see it, is no longer truth, but political transformation—of students and society.

The aim of education, as many on our campuses now see it, is no longer truth, but political transformation.

To object to education's being used in this way is not to suggest that teaching and learning have been models of perfection in the past. Minorities, women, and immigrants have often been overlooked, and one of the major achievements of recent scholarship has been to increase knowledge about these groups and about the individuals who comprise them. With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, for example, scholars at Duke University, collaborating with colleagues from historically black colleges and universities in the South, are undertaking an extensive study of the attitudes and achievements of black Southerners during the age of segregation; other researchers are collecting and publishing the papers of notable American women such as Jane Addams and Frances Willard; a scholar at Texas A&M has translated letters that German-Americans wrote back to Germany between 1834 and 1936.[6] Such efforts broaden knowledge and enlarge understanding. Our history is richer than we knew, and it is, perhaps, one of the curiosities of our age that this fuller knowledge has been accompanied by a narrowing impulse, a desire to force-feed students prescribed versions of past and present—and to close both off to debate.

Certainly this tendency is one of the dangers of our age. In the last few years, as we have come to know what life was

like under totalitarian regimes in the former Soviet Union and countries dominated by it, we have seen how impoverished existence is when people are not permitted to pursue their insights and pass them along. We have also learned that suppressing thought that is ideologically inconvenient simply does not work. In the long run, neither individuals nor societies flourish when truth becomes the servant of politics.

Politics on the Campus

TO SOMEONE VISITING one of today's scholarly conventions, inhibition of thought and expression might not seem a problem. At recent gatherings of the Modern Language Association, for example, papers have been presented on such topics as "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" and "Is Alice Still in Phallus Land?"[7] At the 1992 session of the College Art Association, one presenter illustrated her remarks with ten-foot color projections of female genitalia.[8] At the American Academy of Religion's 1991 annual meeting, the vocabulary of one presentation was so unrestrained that the editors of a journal reporting on the convention felt obliged to distance themselves from its "scatological language."[9] But at the same time that faculty members have been expressing themselves thus freely, students have had limits imposed on their speech. In the 1980s and early 1990s, colleges and universities across the nation established speech codes for students—rules about what can and cannot be said and sanctions for violation. A student could find him- or herself before a review board for an epithet shouted in anger. For a time, one university even prohibited "inappropriately directed laughter."[10]

These codes have been widely condemned by groups ranging from the National Association of Scholars to the American Civil Liberties Union. Speech must be protected, even when it is offensive, these groups argue. Indeed, offensive

speech is especially important to protect since it is exactly in this context that erosion of rights is likely to start. Opponents of speech codes readily acknowledge that offensive speech can be rude, unpleasant, and ignorant. The proper response, they maintain, is not suppression, but argument; not less speech, but more speech.

A recent Supreme Court ruling may well force many institutions to abandon or recast their speech codes. But even if the impact of speech codes diminishes, the rationales that have been offered to justify them remain illustrative of the atmosphere on many campuses. Duke University's Stanley Fish, for example, has defended restrictions on expression on the grounds that free speech is not a neutral concept, but a "political construct" currently in the way of liberal-left purposes. "Nowadays," he writes, "the First Amendment is the First refuge of Scoundrels."[11] Mari Matsuda of the University of Hawaii has argued that freedom of speech deserves only selective protection: The free speech rights of "outsiders," such as women and minorities, should be defended, but not those of white males.[12] Harvard University's Alan Dershowitz describes what he sees as the result of this line of thinking:

Speech must be protected, even when it is offensive.

> Women and blacks are entirely free to attack white men (even "dead white men," as they do in describing the current curriculum) in the most offensive of terms. Radical feminists can accuse all men of being rapists, and radical African-Americans can accuse all whites of being racists, without fear of discipline or rebuke. But even an unintentionally offensive parody of women or blacks provides the occasion for demanding the resignation of deans, the disciplining of students and an atmosphere reminiscent of McCarthyism.[13]

Nadine Strossen, president of the American Civil Liberties Union, has pointed out that protecting some speech, but not all, amounts to "content discrimination." According to

Strossen, "These policies are saying it's OK to convey an anti-conservative opinion but not OK to convey an anti-feminist opinion."[14] It is precisely because many speech codes limit expression on the basis of its content that they are vulnerable under the recent Supreme Court ruling.

Speech codes are merely one example of how campuses have become politicized in recent years. At the most recent Modern Language Association convention, a scholar from the University of Texas at Austin discussed "the task of the politically committed cultural worker in today's university," while another from the University of California at San Diego urged her fellow professors to "disrupt our students' ideas of inevitable capitalism." A faculty member from Columbia University felt obliged to issue warnings that American business might profit from awareness of cultural difference. Concerned that companies such as Coca-Cola might become more effective at marketing their products if they became more knowledgeable about how different societies work, she urged her assembled colleagues to find ways of teaching about cultural difference that could not be appropriated by what she called "late capitalism."[15]

People intent on using the classroom to advance a political agenda have become very frank about their purpose.

At the 1992 College Art Association conference, a speaker from the University of Southern California warned against teaching about women painters such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, who frequently chose women and children for their subjects. The images of domestic life Cassatt and Morisot created "reinforce patriarchal thought," this speaker argued, and thus work against feminist interests. "We must never forget," she reminded the audience, "that feminism is, above all, a political movement."[16]

In the last few years, people intent on using the curriculum and the classroom to advance a political agenda have become very frank about their purpose. In an article in *Harvard Educational Review*, a professor at the University of

Wisconsin rejects the code words, such as "critical pedagogy," that have been used to veil politicized teaching. She insists that professors like herself be open about their intention "to appropriate public resources (classrooms, school supplies, teacher/professor salaries, academic requirements and degrees) to further various 'progressive' political agendas." This professor describes a course she has taught at the University of Wisconsin. Called, innocuously enough, "Curriculum and Instruction 607," the course taught students how to conduct political demonstrations and then gave them opportunity to use their newly acquired skills by, as the professor describes it, "interrupting business-as-usual (that is, social relations of racism, sexism, classism, Eurocentrism as usual) in the public spaces of the library mall and administrative offices." For such efforts, students earned three credits.[17]

Some no longer question whether to use the classroom for political purpose; their only question is how most effectively to do so.

In some quarters, there is no longer any question of whether to use the classroom for political purpose; the only question is how most effectively to do so. Writing in a recent issue of *College English*, a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, a professor at California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo suggests that strategies must be calibrated: One should not try to reeducate students at a highly selective university in the same way as at a community college. At his own middle-class institution, this professor says, he has found the following strategy useful:

> The best starting point is to challenge [students'] conditioned belief in their freedom of choice and mobility within American society by bringing them to a critical awareness of the constrictions in their own class position. . . . Under the rhetorical topic of learning to examine issues from viewpoints differing from their own ethnocentric one, they can be exposed to sources delineating the gross inequities between the upper class and themselves; the odds against their attaining room at the top; the way their education . . .

> has channeled them toward a mid-level professional and social slot and conditioned them into authoritarian conformity; and their manipulation by the elites controlling big business, mass politics, media and consumership, in large part through the rhetoric of public doublespeak.[18]

This faculty member is determined to convert his students to his point of view. He has no intention of introducing them to other perspectives. He wants students to embrace his conviction that the United States is a closed and class-ridden society, and he intends to bring them to this realization while they are in his English class.

A Princeton professor says, "I teach in the Ivy League in order to have direct access to the minds of the children of the ruling classes."

A professor at Princeton University tells the *New York Times*, "I teach in the Ivy League in order to have direct access to the minds of the children of the ruling classes."[19] A teacher and graduate student at Duke University writes in *College English* that teaching students to think critically will not necessarily bring them to "radical visions of the world." To instill such a vision, "the teacher must recognize that he or she must influence (perhaps manipulate is the more accurate word) students' values through charisma or power."[20]

These views of teaching—and the ethic they imply—are a sharp departure from the way faculty members have traditionally viewed their responsibilities in the classroom. They represent as well an entirely new attitude toward students and their rights. It used to be thought that they, like professors, should have academic freedom. They did not come to the college or university to be indoctrinated in the views of their professors. They came to learn about a variety of views on a host of subjects, to explore and challenge a wealth of ideas on how to live and what to value.

Students who find themselves in a classroom where the professor has a political purpose are unlikely to have this kind of experience. For one thing, debate between student and

professor is by nature an unequal affair. A genuine clash of viewpoints usually requires a spirit of generosity on the part of the professor, a willingness, for example, to help students flesh out incompletely formed ideas, even if they are different from the professor's own. It is hard to imagine the professor from California quoted above, the one who wants his students to view themselves as victims of big business and consumership, suggesting books and articles that would help students make a case for free markets.

Students can object to politicized teaching, but to do so is to take a risk.

Students can object to politicized teaching, of course. They can disagree with professors. But to do so is to take a risk. "Every effort by instructors to impose their own political orientation can pressure students to express ideas not because they believe them," Derek Bok observes, "but because they fear they may otherwise get a poor grade or experience other unpleasant consequences."[21] A student at Mount Holyoke College wrote an article in a campus newspaper objecting to the political bent of a philosophy class in which she was enrolled. Her professor's response was, without any advance warning to the student, to leave class early one day so that the student's classmates could let her know what they thought of her ideas. The newspaper for which the student had written described what ensued as "a verbal lynching":

> With the absence of a moderator, and in the midst of so many angry student activists . . . the "discussion" quickly degenerated into an *ad hominem* denunciation of a single student. As [the student] put it, "They were no longer attacking my political beliefs; they were attacking my character."[22]

A student at Oberlin College in Ohio describes a similar incident:

> In a course I took last year a maverick student said he agreed with a Supreme Court justice's view that a particular affirmative action program would

> unconstitutionally discriminate on the basis of race. During the next few minutes a couple of students vehemently objected. One raised her voice significantly, the other began to yell at him. In the following fifteen minutes, the professor did not speak; instead, he took other volunteers. Almost all of these students jumped on the bandwagon, berating the one maverick student. The professor gave him one more chance to speak. By this time the student was quite flustered and incoherent.

The student describing this incident notes, "The class learned that bringing out such controversial views would carry a high social cost. They would be less likely to repeat the 'error' of their fellow student."[23]

An emerging theme in feminist writing is how to break down student resistance to feminist ideology.

A student at Wesleyan University in Connecticut offers the following description of classroom life today:

> The classroom used to be the one place where anything went. There used to be a dialogue. If you said something ridiculous people would take you apart on the merits of your argument. Now, the accusations are things like: "That's typical white male thinking."[24]

An emerging theme in feminist writing is how to break down student resistance to feminist ideology. A professor from the University of Wisconsin offers an example from one of her composition classes: a student who complains that the professor "consistently channels class discussions around feminism and does not spend time discussing the comments that oppose her beliefs. In fact she usually twists them around to support her beliefs." A first step in dealing with such resistance, according to the professor, is to deny that the objections have any validity, to "argue that political commitment—especially feminist commitment—is a legitimate classroom strategy."[25] Other feminists who write about encountering objections to their teaching generally agree that

persistence is key to overcoming them. Student complaints are not to be seen as reason for abandoning politics in the classroom. They should be seen instead as confirmation of the students' need for enlightenment—and the professor's duty to provide it. Student protest, as a feminist professor at Tufts University describes it, is "the sign that I am doing my job. It swims along beside my ship, like a familiar fish: there it is again, so I must be on course."[26]

Students who are too persistent in their objections risk being accused of "anti-feminist harassment," particularly if they are male. Among the forms of such harassment, according to two professors at California State University, Fresno, are "claiming male victim status or challenging facts with particularistic anecdotes to undermine the credibility of feminist reading materials and instructors" and "aggressively pointing out minor flaws in statements of other students or the instructor." Without irony, the two professors note that "anti-feminist harassment" also includes "taking intransigent and dogmatic stands."[27]

Students learn that certain views will be condemned, ridiculed, or ignored.

Students learn that there are some ideas it is better not to bring up. They learn that certain views will be condemned, ridiculed, or ignored. But are their minds changed as a result? Some probably are. It is doubtless more than coincidence that some of the most notorious attempts to suppress thought and expression involve students trying to enforce the orthodoxies that have become the staples of politicized classrooms.[28] But there are also undergraduates of independent mind. In her new book, *Ed School Follies*, Rita Kramer reports on finding students—particularly outside the Ivy League—who refuse to move beyond what common sense and their own experience tell them.[29]

Orthodoxy in the classroom may not bring about as many conversions as its proponents would wish. But even when it does not change minds, it is cause for concern. How

are students who have to sit through classes in which they cannot say what they think to learn about the value of intellectual honesty? How can students who have to tolerate teachers with whom they cannot disagree be blamed if they come to think of college courses as something simply to be endured, gotten over, gotten through, preferably with as little effort as possible? If students hear repeatedly that all human endeavor is, at bottom, nothing more than a struggle for power, who can blame them for falling into cynicism? The president of the Kettering Foundation, commenting on a survey of U.S. college students funded by his organization, notes that it shows students to be "cynical in the extreme."[30] A professor at Vanderbilt University observes:

> Cynicism prevails. More and more students have become cynical about the possibilities of democracy itself. It finally comes down to power and how to grab one's share of it. The notion that people could make alliances with each other, could come together over shared purposes seems more and more elusive, impossibly romantic to students. And that is troubling.[31]

If students hear repeatedly that all human endeavor is nothing more than a struggle for power, who can blame them for falling into cynicism?

Not every student who experiences politicized teaching becomes a cynic, of course; but even those who do not pay a price. They are not learning how exciting intellectual give-and-take can be or how stimulating is a real engagement with ideas. In humanities classes, they are not even beginning to learn all that these disciplines have to teach. History, literature, and philosophy are about the choices we have to make in life and the ways we give our existence meaning. They are about the delight we take in nature, the tragedies we inevitably encounter, and about the power of human imagination to create beauty from all these things, even from despair. The humanities are about far more than race, class, and gender, but many students never know it.

Truth and Light

POLITICS IN THE CLASSROOM subverts what sociologist Edward Shils of the University of Chicago has called "the task of the university": "the methodical discovery and the teaching of truths about serious and important things." Writes Shils:

> There is abroad today a desire, more frequently expressed by academics in the humanities and the social sciences, to derogate or even to dissolve the idea that truths can be discovered and taught. Denial of the possibility of detachment, denial of the possibility of the disciplined and disinterested search for knowledge, denial of the possibility of objective knowledge, which is true independently of the passions or desires or "material interests" of the discoverer and transmitter have become more common in recent years in certain influential circles of academics. Some academics preach these denials day in and day out.[32]

Philosophers have never found truth to be an easy concept, and scholars have long acknowledged the ways that ideas are shaped by experience; but these familiar critiques have now become extreme positions. No less venerable an organization than the American Council of Learned Societies issued a 1989 report advancing the view that impartiality is a dangerous myth. "Claims of disinterest, objectivity, and universality are not to be trusted," wrote the authors of the

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report, implying that only the naive or the duplicitous would set such goals.[33] In monographs and scholarly journals, similar notions are put forward again and again. Two historians from the University of Pennsylvania debunk the idea that historians should be judged by the evidence they cite and the way they use it, because, as the historians put it:

> We are all engaged in writing a kind of propaganda.... Rather than believe in the absolute truth of what we are writing, we must believe in the moral or political position we are taking with it. . . . Historians should assess an argument on the basis of its persuasiveness, its political utility, and its political sincerity.[34]

Acknowledging that human beings will never be omniscient is insufficient reason for abandoning the quest to know as much as we can.

We cannot know the truth, in other words, so we should abandon the pursuit of it in scholarship and in the classroom—and advance whatever is politically useful.

The difficulties with this approach are many. If truth is unknowable, what possible ground is there for making such an assertion? As E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has observed: "For . . . cognitive atheists, all principles are subject to a universal relativism except relativism itself. But whence comes *its* exemption? What is the sanction, in a world devoid of absolutes, for *its* absoluteness?"[35] Acknowledging that human beings will never be omniscient about past or present is insufficient reason for abandoning the quest to know as much as we can. Acknowledging that views are shaped by experience is insufficient reason to give up the attempt to move beyond ourselves and to seek to be objective. Indeed, to abandon truth and objectivity as goals and put political expediency in their place is to move perilously close to the world of George Orwell's *1984*, the world where two and two make five—if it's politically useful.

No incident better illustrates the important place that political expediency has assumed in American academic life than the aftermath of *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Sears, Roebuck, & Company*, an anti-discrimination

case from the mid-1980s. The EEOC brought suit against Sears for discriminating against women in commission-sales positions. Central to their case was the fact that women were statistically underrepresented in the commission-sales jobs. Sears maintained that it was wrong for the EEOC to assume that the statistics were proof of discrimination and offered as an expert witness Rosalind Rosenberg, a professor at Barnard College, who testified that much modern scholarship showed that women often make different choices than men. The paucity of their numbers in the commission-sales positions did not necessarily reflect discrimination. It might well reflect the wish to avoid the highly competitive atmosphere surrounding those positions and to choose jobs that were more consistent with family obligations.

When the judge dismissed the case, saying that the EEOC's statistical argument was flawed, Rosenberg was denounced by feminist scholars. No one suggested that she had inaccurately represented modern scholarship on women; instead, she was charged with the "immoral act" of allowing her scholarship to be used for an antifeminist purpose.[36] At a meeting at Columbia University of 150 feminist scholars, not a single person was willing to defend Rosenberg. At the American Historical Association's annual meeting, the Coordinating Committee of Women in the Historical Profession passed a resolution proclaiming, "We have a responsibility not to allow our scholarship to be used against the interests of women struggling for equity in our society."[37]

Whether in courtroom or classroom, advancing a political agenda is judged by many to be not only acceptable but also desirable.

Whether in courtroom or classroom, advancing a political agenda is judged by many to be not only acceptable but also desirable. How great a change in values this represents is made clear by Betty Jean Craige of the University of Georgia. In an influential book, *Reconnection*, Craige holds up Charles W. Eliot's 1869 inaugural address at Harvard as an example of the way that educational leaders used to think. "The

very word 'education,'" Eliot declared, "is a standing protest against dogmatic teaching." Craige also points to University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper's words in 1900: "A professor abuses his privilege who takes advantage of a classroom exercise to propagate the partisan view of one or another of the political parties."[38]

Such statements, Craige explains, represent an older, "dualist" view that assumes that truth can be pursued apart from politics. Now, however, there has been a "paradigm shift from dualism to holism," and a younger generation of professors, for whom the 1960s were a formative era, holds that there is no truth apart from politics, no way to separate ideas from ideology. Since education, like all intellectual activity, is always in the service of politics of some sort, faculty members who want to use the classroom to produce "citizens eager to reform social structures" are justified in doing so. "To the criticism that they have turned research and teaching into political activism," Craige writes, faculty members "may reply that all discourse implies an ideology of some sort and that they are simply declaring openly their purposes and interests."[39]

The idea of replacing truth with politics has been sharply contested; but it has, nevertheless, had substantial influence on campuses.

Philosopher Sidney Hook once called the argument that all teaching is indoctrination "an old ploy," used by "every group that wants to put something over on the public."[40] The logical weakness of the argument, he wrote, "is that it conflates different meanings of the term 'political.' It goes from a sense of 'political' synonymous with a basic choice in any field, so broad that it lacks an intelligible opposite, so that to be is to be political, to a sense of the term 'political' in its transparent, conventional sense."[41]

The idea of replacing truth with politics has been sharply contested; but it has, nevertheless, had substantial influence on campuses. It has energized development of many theories—from poststructuralism and deconstruction to

Marxism and feminism—that have altered what goes on in college classrooms. Professional humanities groups attempt from time to time to show that not much has changed, but theirs is a difficult case to make. The Modern Language Association, after a recent survey of upper-division courses at American colleges and universities, issued a press release headed, "Professors have not abandoned traditional texts."[42] The survey results showed, however, that about half of the professors teaching nineteenth-century American literature no longer consider such a standard author as Nathaniel Hawthorne particularly important for a course in nineteenth-century American literature; about half no longer regard Thoreau or Melville as essential. The Modern Language Association survey also showed the extent of faculty interest in contemporary academic theories. At research universities and among recent Ph.D.'s, more than 40 percent say that Marxist approaches to literature influence their teaching. Among all groups, 61 percent say that feminist approaches influence their teaching.[43]

New theories often deny the possibility of objectivity—the very principle that a genuine exploration of ideas requires.

These theoretical approaches, like more traditional ones, can enhance the study of literature and other subjects. Brought into the classroom as ideas to be tested, they can stimulate discussion; but brought in as dogma, their effect is quite the opposite. Discussion becomes less important than conversion; fuller understanding less important than agreement with the professor. And it is all too easy to bring new theories into the classroom as dogma since they often deny the possibility of objectivity—the very principle that a genuine exploration of ideas requires.

The Attack on Standards

THE IDEA THAT THERE IS NO TRUTH to pursue has a corollary: There are no standards to meet. What we think of as standards are, in the words of a law professor at the University of Virginia, "the so-called 'neutral' evaluative norms of the dominant cultural group."[44]

Educators, then, should not be concerned with A's and honors and other signs of excellence or even with the hard work and accomplishments that outstanding grades and high honors have traditionally recognized; instead, the goal should be political change, such as the creation of a society in which people do not compete with one another and everyone feels good about him- or herself. In *Ed School Follies*, Rita Kramer shows this thinking at work in the training of future teachers. A professor at Columbia's Teachers College urges her students to see traditional measures of accomplishment as artificial constructs that perpetuate the current power structure. "There are no 'objective standards,'" she tells the class, "there is no such thing as 'objective norms.'" A professor at Eastern Michigan University leads her students in a deconstruction of the story of *Tootle*, the train. She wants them to understand how much damage such stories do by encouraging youngsters to believe in harmful myths like "work hard and you'll make it." A professor at California State University at Long Beach gives her class a list of nonjudgmental ways of acknowledging students' responses:

"The list included *Um-hmmm, That's a thought, That's one possibility, That's one idea, That's another way to look at it, I hear you,* and eleven other ways not to tell a student the answer was . . . wrong."[45]

If one insists on making judgments in a world where there are no objective standards, according to this line of thought, they must be contextual. Specifically, they must take into account characteristics determined by gender and race. Women have different ways of perceiving the world and expressing themselves, it is argued. They are more interested in "conversation" and "connectedness," whereas men are "devoted to competitive paradigms and questions about whether the individual will win or lose."[46] People of color, who have been victims of racism, have "distinct normative insights" and "speak with a special voice."[47] Evaluations must take these special characteristics into account, it is argued, not only out of fairness to women and minorities, but also in recognition that only they can bring their special perceptions to a group or an enterprise.

Defending the idea that there are standards transcending race and gender is no easy task today.

Eloquent protests have been lodged against this line of thought. Law professors Randall Kennedy of Harvard and Stephen Carter of Yale have both objected to the stereotyping inherent in the claim of racial distinctiveness. To advance racial status as an intellectual credential, Kennedy argues, is to confuse "accidental attributes and achieved distinctions."[48] Carter defends the idea of objective norms by arguing:

> Standards of excellence are a requisite of civilization. To say instead that excellence cannot be judged is to say that excellence is not possible. To say that excellence is not possible is to say, really, that nothing is better than anything else. And if nothing is better than anything else, then the entire project of human progress is a joke. But it isn't a joke.[49]

Defending the idea that there are standards transcending race and gender is no easy task today. Kennedy writes that observ-

ers who disagree with critical race theories are sometimes afraid to speak out for "fear of being branded as racist."[50] People who take exception to feminist theories can expect to be charged with having an unenlightened attitude toward women. When novelist Gail Godwin wrote that an anthology of literature by women elevated "the values of feminist interpretation . . . at the expense of literary art and individual talents," she was accused of displaying "the resistance of a woman writer who is herself at odds concerning her relationship to a tradition of other women."[51] When Harvard scholar Helen Vendler offered a lengthy critique of feminist writings in the *New York Review of Books*, she was denounced as repressed and bigoted.[52]

There was a time when politics were irrelevant to whether someone should be hired. Now politics are often front and center.

The attack on standards has had a decided impact on higher education. There was a time when a person's politics were held to be irrelevant to whether he or she should be hired. What mattered was whether he or she had achieved excellence according to intellectual criteria. Now politics are often front and center. In 1988, the Association of American Colleges' Project on the Status and Education of Women distributed a list of questions to be used by those interviewing potential faculty members and administrators. Aimed at assessing a job candidate's commitment to women's issues, the questions included:

> How has the women's movement affected your professional life?
>
> Approximately how many men have you nominated for fellowships, awards, and prizes? How many women?
>
> Describe activities—including articles, interviews, and speeches—in which you have taken part that demonstrate a public commitment to women's equity.[53]

Writing in a recent issue of *Harper's Magazine*, Louis Menand of Queens College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York observes: "It is now regarded as

legitimate by some professors to argue that the absence of a political intention or a multicultural focus in another professor's work constitutes prima facie disqualification for professional advancement."[54] John Patrick Diggins of the City College of New York notes in his recent book that by the late 1980s, "A white male conservative who admired Madison more than Marx, had about as much chance of getting hired on some faculty as Woody Allen of starting as point guard for the Knicks."[55]

A college or university that requires allegiance to a political agenda was once something that could only be imagined. In the late 1960s, social scientist Alan Wolfe toyed with the idea of what an institution based on such thinking would be like:

> The social university is not primarily concerned with the abstract pursuit of scholarship, but with the utilization of knowledge obtained through scholarship to obtain social change. Therefore, it does not recognize the right of its members to do anything they wish under the name of academic freedom; instead it assumes that all its members are committed to social change.[56]

What was once only a fantasy today threatens to become a reality.

Academic Freedom

THE PRINCIPAL RATIONALE for academic freedom—and the tenure that protects it—is that it makes possible the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. In 1915, when the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) first codified principles affirming the right of faculty members freely to inquire and teach, the organization emphasized that professors were expected to do so in accordance with what Richard Hofstadter and Walter Metzger have described as "norms of neutrality and competence."[57] As the 1915 report put it:

> The liberty of the scholar within the university to set forth his conclusions, be they what they may, is conditioned by their being conclusions gained by a scholar's method and held in a scholar's spirit; that is to say, they must be the fruits of competent and patient and sincere inquiry.

Neutrality did not mean that the professor had to hide his personal views, but he should make sure they were not the only ones presented:

> The university teacher . . . should . . . set forth justly, without suppression or innuendo, the divergent opinions of other investigators; he should cause his students to become familiar with the best published expressions of the great historic types of doctrine upon the questions at issue; and he should, above all,

> remember that his business is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions but to train them to think for themselves, and to provide them access to those materials which they need if they are to think intelligently.[58]

To be sure, the AAUP has also affirmed the right of professors, as citizens, freely to express themselves on all subjects, to take political stances, even to run for office. But particularly when professors are acting as teachers, the organization has consistently maintained that partisanship is inappropriate. The 1987 AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics declares: "As teachers, professors encourage the free pursuit of learning in their students. . . . They protect their academic freedom."[59]

For historical reasons, the threat to academic freedom has been assumed to come from outside the academy.

For historical reasons, the threat to academic freedom has been assumed to come from outside the academy. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, there were repeated instances of outside groups, in alliance with sympathetic trustees and administrators, securing the dismissal of professors whose views they found objectionable. In imposing their beliefs and interests, these groups impeded scholarly inquiry; and a primary purpose of organizing the AAUP and establishing and defending principles of academic freedom has been to shield professors from outside interference so that they, as scientists and scholars, can freely pursue the truth both in their studies and with their students.

But what can all this mean when the idea of pursuing the truth has been rejected? When politics has been invited into the classroom? A series of highly publicized events at the University of Texas at Austin provides a case study.

In the spring of 1990, a committee of the English department decided to revise the freshman composition course. Henceforth, English 306, the required composition course taken by some three thousand freshmen, would focus on the

theme of "difference." All classes would use the same textbook, an anthology called *Racism and Sexism*.

This book begins by defining racism as something only white people can be guilty of and sexism as unique to men. It goes on to portray the United States as a country in which racism and sexism pervade every aspect of life. The book offers no comparisons with other cultures, no context to show how American ideals and practices measure up against those of the rest of the world or the rest of history. Instead, it paints a picture of unremitting oppression and suggests that any solution will require "fundamental changes in the ways that wealth is produced and distributed"—that is, the abandonment of capitalism.[60]

Professor Alan Gribben decried the course revision as part of "the current mania for converting every academic subject into a politicized study of race, class and gender."

Not surprisingly, the course revision caused debate. A few people within the English department objected to the revised course's lack of balance, but they were a small minority in a large department and had no effect. Subsequently, Alan Gribben, a seventeen-year veteran of the English department, wrote to Texas newspapers decrying the course revision as part of "the current mania for converting every academic subject into a politicized study of race, class and gender."[61] A torrent of letters, articles, and editorials followed. Another faculty member from the English department wrote in the *Austin American-Statesman* that the syllabus for the new course paid insufficient attention to "grammar and the mechanics of writing."[62] A group of high school English teachers from around the state wrote the university's vice president for academic affairs that English 306 should focus on writing and thinking: "Polemics will come soon enough."[63] Fifty-six faculty members from more than a dozen different departments, including psychology and sociology, paid for an advertisement in the *Daily Texan* in which they stated their concerns and objections:

> Specifically, we are concerned that the new curriculum for Freshman English distorts the fundamental purpose of a composition class—to enhance a student's ability to write—by subordinating instruction in writing to the discussion of social issues and, potentially, to the advancement of specific political positions.
>
> We are concerned that assistant instructors in E306 may have little or no training to prepare them to teach the complex legal, sociological, psychological, and historical issues of racism and sexism at a college level. . . .
>
> We are concerned that the altered E306 class may be biased in its examination of controversial political questions. In a course on writing, we believe that freshmen should be exposed to a full spectrum of cogently argued positions, not to a single hegemonic view.[04]

Alan Gribben found himself being vilified in campus speeches and receiving hate mail and anonymous late-night phone calls.

Shortly thereafter, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts delayed implementation of the course for a year. In May 1991, before the revised course was ever taught, its syllabus was changed to include a broader array of subjects, a greater diversity of viewpoints, and extensive instruction on how to analyze, argue, and write.

Also in May 1991, Alan Gribben resigned from the University of Texas. He had disagreed with colleagues in the English department before, he told newspapers in Texas. In 1987, he had voted against a master's program in ethnic and Third World literature. Although he supported such a program at the doctoral level, his negative vote for the master's program had led many of his colleagues to shun him, he said. They refused to recommend graduate students to him, for example, or to put him on committees. Now, as a result of his stand in the English 306 controversy, the situation with his colleagues had grown worse. Moreover, he found himself

being vilified in campus speeches and receiving hate mail and anonymous late-night phone calls. "If I continued to live here," Gribben told the *Dallas Morning News* as he was packing to leave for another position, "I'd have to live under siege."[65]

These events at the University of Texas at Austin raise obvious questions of academic freedom. For example, the AAUP's Statement on Professional Ethics holds:

> As colleagues, professors have obligations that derive from common membership in the community of scholars. Professors do not discriminate against or harass colleagues. They respect and defend the free inquiry of associates.[66]

Was Alan Gribben discriminated against or harassed? Was his right to free inquiry respected and defended?

Was Alan Gribben discriminated against or harassed? Was his right to free inquiry respected and defended? What about students in English 306? Did the syllabus as originally revised provide "access to those materials which they need if they are to think intelligently," as the AAUP's 1915 Declaration had stated should happen?

But when representatives of professional scholarly organizations spoke on the English 306 controversy, it was not the academic freedom of Alan Gribben or English 306 students that concerned them—it was the academic freedom of the English department. Robert Kreiser, associate secretary of the AAUP, defined the issue as one of academic governance. He spoke of "second-guessing by people outside the areas of specialization" and said that the involvement by people outside the English department in the English 306 controversy meant "there are definitely grounds for concern."[67] The Modern Language Association Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities declared that the English 306 controversy raised "serious issues of academic procedure and freedom." The Modern Language Association committee was particularly concerned about "pressures on the University of Texas administration from sources outside the

English department." Declared the committee: "When the curricular decisions of faculty members given responsibility to design a course of study are subject to revision or reversal by individuals or groups operating outside duly instituted governance structures and procedures, academic freedom has been infringed."[68]

These statements neglect a central issue in the dispute: the political nature of English 306 as originally revised. The purpose of shielding the department from outsiders is to protect disinterested inquiry. But when inquiry is not disinterested—when a syllabus has a political bent, for example—then it is not detachment but bias that is protected when outside influence is declared impermissible. The idea of departmental autonomy also rests on the assumption of expertise: Decisions in a specialized area ought to be made by specialists. But when racism and sexism are the subjects, who are the specialists? The English department? Why not the psychology department? Or the history department? Or the sociology department? Indeed, if the subject is political, why not the citizenry at large?

When racism and sexism are the subjects, who are the specialists? The English department? Why not the citizenry at large?

Betty Jean Craige of the University of Georgia has noted the disjunction between politicized approaches to scholarship and teaching and the traditional rationale for academic freedom. She writes:

> If we abandon a belief in objectivity, we must redefine the principle of "academic freedom," for the public and for ourselves, in terms of contextual value. The discipline—and the academic world generally—cannot use the notion of academic independence from politics to support academic-evaluation-by-academics after it has shown society's intellectual activity to be inseparable from its political activity.[69]

Seeking a new rationale for academic freedom, Craige argues:

> Since we can no longer contend that our scholarly activities . . . imply no ideology, since we can no

> longer contend that the academy can operate free of political pressures, and since we can no longer believe that truth is not socially influenced, we must claim academic freedom and tenure on the relativistic grounds of social value: it is for the continued health of the country that our society should grant us, its academic intellectuals, the freedom to seek understanding of the world, to publish the results of our research, and to teach what we know to our students.[70]

Craige's book, *Reconnection*, has been enthusiastically received within the academic community. In 1989 it was awarded the prestigious Ness Award at the annual convention of the Association of American Colleges. But Craige's argument about the new grounds for academic freedom should not go unchallenged. One can, for example, make a strong case that if humanities departments are going to teach politics, then "the continued health of the country" is enhanced by the involvement of faculty members in other departments and citizens from outside the university. When politics is the subject, there are many experts; and debate can only be enriched by the diversity of experiences and viewpoints they bring.

Even more basic is the question of whether political agendas belong in classrooms. Although many humanities scholars write as though the matter has been settled, it most decidedly has not. There are those who still value truth and objectivity as aims of education and who believe deeply that their pursuit, both by professors and students, must be protected. When that pursuit is hindered from within, as many think it was in Texas, academic freedom may well require those outside the department—and outside the university—to speak in its defense.

The University and Society

IDEAS THAT ARE ADVANCED in colleges and universities often have an impact that reaches far beyond the campuses. The notion that there are no truths to pursue, but only political purposes, can now be found in cultural institutions such as museums. "The West as America," a 1991 exhibition at the National Museum of American Art, is a case in point. The exhibition made no pretense of objectivity. Its purpose, said the catalog, was to unveil "hidden agendas and ambitions."[71] The beauty and adventure of the art of westward expansion were shown time and again to be romantic propaganda, covering over racism, sexism, and the depredations of capitalism. William Jewett's painting, *The Promised Land—the Grayson Family*, for example, shows a family on a mountainside with golden valleys in the distance. The accompanying wall caption emphasized what Jewett left out: "profiteering, revolts against Mexican authority, and Indian massacres."[72] According to the wall caption, the five cowboys defending a desert water hole in Frederic Remington's *Fight for the Water Hole* are symbolic of the uneasiness felt by Eastern industrialists who were being challenged by foreign laborers they had imported to work in their mills and factories.

"The West as America" was called by one commentator "the most politically correct museum exhibit in American history." Another labeled it "an indictment of the nation's

founding and development," and still another, "a perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit."[73] The size of the exhibit and its aggressive lack of objectivity called unusual attention to it, but "The West as America" is by no means unique in its embrace of politics. A 1992 exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution, "Etiquette of the Undercaste," advocated a view of the United States as a society so class-ridden that those born at the bottom can never hope to move up. "Upward mobility," announced materials accompanying the exhibition, "is one of our most cherished myths."[74]

Politicized museum exhibitions are still the exception, but some scholars hope to change that.

Politicized museum exhibitions are still the exception rather than the rule, but some scholars hope to change that. At a Smithsonian-sponsored panel discussion held in conjunction with "Etiquette of the Undercaste," a panelist called on artists to "belong to activist organizations . . . and develop forms that are appropriate vehicles for revolutionary ideas."[75] A professor at the College of William and Mary, noting the prestige that Marxism and feminism enjoy in the academic study of art history, suggests that these approaches could help museums break out of their "masterpiece-treasure-genius-paradise syndrome."[76] An official at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History argues that natural history and science museums must have "a more engaged role": "In an environmentally degraded world," he writes, "natural history and science museums can no longer be passive scholarly institutions, curious about how the world works." Arguing that "all truths including anthropological and scientific ones are now viewed as contingent, contextual, and relative," the Smithsonian official maintains that "sound scholarship alone is not enough for the 21st century. The political dimension of our mission and relationship to our audiences must also be aggressively addressed."[77]

Oliver Stone's *JFK* is an example in film of what happens when history is disconnected from the idea of objective truth. Mixing documentary footage with reconstructed

scenes, sound bites with reenactments and conjecture, Stone wove the story of a grand conspiracy in which the CIA, the FBI, the Pentagon, President Lyndon Johnson, anti-Castro Cubans, and various unsavory others carry out the assassination of President Kennedy, murdering him because he planned to withdraw American forces from Vietnam. Even before his film was released, Stone was barraged by critics who disputed the "twisted truth" of *JFK*.[78] They denounced the way he ignored information that contradicted his thesis and created fictional characters and situations to support it. Stone defended his work by arguing that it was his "interpretation of history," and one, moreover, that was superior to the interpretations offered up by journalists. "I feel obligated to defend my right to interpret history as an artist," said Stone. "I certainly think it's too dangerous to leave to newsmen, who have done such a shoddy job of interpreting."[79] A cynical moviegoer made a similar point this way, "A lot of what's written about current events in the newspapers is a lie. So give Oliver Stone a chance to lie too if he wants to."[80]

How can a self-governing people survive if they reject even the possibility of objective standards against which competing interpretations can be measured?

Off campus as well as on, the view has gained currency that reality is nothing more than different perspectives advanced by different people in order to promote their interests. Some who have observed the increasing influence of this idea see it as a threat to democracy: How can a self-governing people survive if they reject even the possibility of objective standards against which competing interpretations and claims can be measured? "America urgently needs to reaffirm the principle that it is possible to carry out an analysis of social life which rational human beings will recognize as being true," writes anthropologist Marvin Harris. "The alternative is to stand by helplessly as special interest groups tear the United States apart in the name of their 'separate realities,' or to wait until one of them grows strong enough to force its own irrational and subjective brand of reality on all the rest."[81]

So long as the assault on objectivity is carried on in

museums and movies, knowledgeable people can do what Harris recommends. They can object to omissions and distortions, and they can argue for a reasoned search for truth. They can also ignore exhibitions and films that insist on making political points in the guise of education and choose others instead.

The situation is different in the classroom. Students who are presented with a tendentious interpretation may not know enough to object, nor can they make alternative selections as a museum visitor or moviegoer can. Warner Brothers has distributed to high schools and colleges curricular materials on Oliver Stone's *JFK* that present evidence in the same selective way as the film.[82] How many students are sophisticated enough to object at the many points where objection is needed?

Students who are presented with a tendentious interpretation may not know enough to object.

The political agendas that activists seek to impose on elementary and secondary classrooms bear a strong resemblance to those that can be found in higher education. Again and again, the flaws of Western civilization and American history are presented in exaggerated form, while other societies and cultures are made to seem fault free. In Oakland, California, where the school board has rejected multicultural textbooks approved by the state, community groups have prepared worksheets for seventh graders that present colonialism and imperialism as though they existed only in the West. A handbook for teachers equates ethnocentrism with Eurocentrism and states the following objective for seventh-grade social studies: "Students should begin to understand how ethnocentric thinking has led some nations to plunder the natural resources of other nations: how eurocentric thinking has led the United States mainstream culture to assimilate the culture of its so-called minority groups."[83]

In Brookline, Massachusetts, a group of parents and citizens reviewed changes in the high school social studies curriculum. While they supported the idea that education

should include the study of non-Western cultures and encourage understanding of the contributions made by diverse groups to this country, members of the group were troubled by what they saw as an excessively negative portrayal of America's European heritage and of United States history. "For example," wrote one member, Sandra Stotsky, "students learn about colonialism and imperialism as Western phenomena only." A United States history final examination cited by Stotsky had the following item:

> A characteristic of the 13 English colonies was (a) complete religious freedom, (b) free high school education, (c) class distinctions, or (d) universal voting.

Observed Stotsky:

> In this upside-down version of history, three of the most positive features of the British colonies and of Western political culture (schooling, voting, and religious freedom) are negativized by being embedded in generalizations that thoughtful students would know were not universally valid at that time. Moreover, by forcing an ahistorical comparison to present-day standards, the question makes a negative feature—class distinctions—more psychologically salient in the student's mind and more likely remembered.[84]

Like many schools reforming their curricula, the Brookline system hired consultants, two of whom advanced the idea that women and minorities think differently, learn differently, and require different standards. While explaining to Brookline teachers that white male logic involves such dichotomies as "right-wrong" and "kill-or-be-killed," one of the advisers observed that this way of thinking has made "young white males, dangerous to themselves and the rest of us especially in a nuclear age."[85]

As a result of parental concern in Brookline, an Advanced Placement European history course that had been

shelved was reestablished. A public debate about what is being taught and how it is being taught was initiated and is ongoing. Parents who decided to make the academic integrity of the curriculum an issue had an effect—but they know that the effort will require their continued involvement.

In the state of New York, informed public reaction has also brought improvement to the social studies curriculum, though there is still cause for serious concern. In 1989, a task force appointed by New York's education commissioner issued "A Curriculum of Inclusion," a report which began, "African Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos, and Native Americans have all been the victims of an intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and the European American world for centuries." Presenting the European tradition as inherently racist and oppressive, the report coupled the poor performance of children in minority groups with what was alleged to be the Eurocentric bias (or "white nationalism," in the words of one task force member) of the New York curriculum. The task force recommended that the curriculum be revised in order to raise the self-esteem of children from minority groups and lower that of children from European cultures.[86]

A group of distinguished historians objected to the "ethnic cheerleading" of the New York curriculum.

Critics attacked "A Curriculum of Inclusion" on many grounds: the uniformly negative way in which it presented European culture, the inflammatory language that seemed sure to set race against race, the idea that education should be designed to raise or lower the self-esteem of targeted groups rather than to increase the knowledge of all students. A group of distinguished historians, headed by Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., issued a statement affirming commitment to "a pluralistic interpretation of American history and . . . support for such shamefully neglected fields as the history of women, of immigration and of minorities," but objecting vehemently to the "ethnic cheerleading" of the New

York curriculum. "We will insist," read the group's dissent, "that the state history curriculum reflect honest and conscientious scholarship and accurately portray the forging of this nation from the experience of many different groups and peoples."[87]

A subsequent report on the New York social studies curriculum was less strident in tone. Much of the Europhobic edge was gone; and in its early pages, the report even affirmed the necessity of teaching children about "values, characteristics, and traditions which we share in common." But that idea soon gave way to the notion that there is no common story, no truth of history that we can teach to all our children. There are only separate racial and ethnic stories, "multiple perspectives," as the report calls them. The co-chairmen of the report-writing group noted that not all members of the committee were comfortable with this idea. "There was a ubiquitous undercurrent of concern for the recognition of historical and other truth," they wrote. But such old-fashioned worries were merely a sign of old-fashioned epistemology and would disappear once there was understanding that knowledge is socially constructed: "It is not that facts, knowledge structures, are unimportant," wrote the co-chairmen, "it is that they are insufficient and often so situation bound as to limit their utility in understanding and problem solving. Thus the concern for multiple truths, situated knowledge, contextual validity and multiple perspectives."[88]

Degrading the notion of objective truth is a poor way of increasing intercultural understanding.

As one critic pointed out, degrading the notion of objective truth is a poor way of increasing intercultural understanding: "In denigrating the appeal to objective truth as a relic of outmoded thinking or a tool of hegemonic control, the report destroys the only ground on which cultural mistrust and animosities can be resolved—the middle ground of reason."[89] In giving the nod to separate truths, the report also advocated something very different from what most parents want for their children. A 1991 poll by the New York State United Teachers

found that 88 percent of African Americans, 87 percent of Hispanics, and 70 percent of whites agreed that schoolchildren should be taught "the common heritage of Americans." Those surveyed also agreed overwhelmingly that this heritage includes "both the traditional events of American history and the contributions and experiences of America's ethnic and racial populations."[90]

The state of California now has a history and social science curriculum that demonstrates that there is no incompatibility between seeking a common historical truth and recognizing the contributions that men and women of diverse backgrounds have made to this country. In fact, our common story is a multicultural one, our common truth about people from Africa, Asia, Europe, and every part of the globe being joined together by belief in equality and freedom. As California's *History-Social Science Framework* describes it:

> The American creed is derived from the language and values found in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Its themes are echoed in patriotic songs such as "America the Beautiful" (". . . and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea") and "America" (". . . from every mountainside, let freedom ring"). The creed provides the unifying theme of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s oration, "I Have a Dream": "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.* . . . This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty. . . .'"[91]

What unites us is a belief in the worth of our aspirations—and a determination to realize them.

The American story is not finished, the *Framework* makes clear. We have often fallen short of our ideals and continue to do so. What unites us is a belief in the worth of our aspirations—and a determination to realize them.

Looking Ahead

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBILITIES that colleges and universities will end their turn toward politics and become oriented once more toward goals of truth and objectivity? What are the chances that in the humanities, in particular, trends will change, and there will be a move away from orthodoxies and a restoration of the principle that encouraging the clash of ideas is among the most important functions of a university?

The generation of scholars that brought politics to the fore of teaching and learning is now tenured and powerful, and likely to remain influential for years to come. But they may have carried their agendas too far even for those who are inclined to be supportive. At the most recent convention of the Modern Language Association, a scholar who has described herself as "a smasher of the canon" stood up in one of the largest sessions to denounce the amount of time being spent on political issues. The "sameness-mentality" of the session had sparked her anger, she wrote later. "I reprimanded colleagues I value but who had disappointed me and many others of our profession with their unsophisticated demonstration of how politically correct they were . . . ."[92] Responding to discontent from some members about how politicized annual meetings of the College Art Association have become, the organization is looking into ways to encourage the presen-

tation of diverse points of view. The head of the committee that plans the annual meeting, herself a supporter of scholarship that focuses on gender and politics, noted that she was "critical of the fact that the new developments seem to be pushing out all the old."[93]

A professor of women's studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst recently wrote an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* denouncing what she perceived as "new dogma": that a person's racial or ethnic identity and views are one and the same, that only women of color can comment on racism, that all people of European origin are racist. She was hesitant to speak out about these things, she wrote, for fear of damaging the feminist movement; but she had finally decided that if no one spoke out, nothing would change: "Everything one tolerates that one shouldn't inevitably returns."[94]

In an ideal world, one could well imagine some of the older academic organizations encouraging discussion about the place of politics in teaching.

Whether these separate expressions of discontent will become part of a larger debate remains to be seen. The National Association of Scholars, a group founded five years ago, has played an important role in bringing together faculty members from across the political spectrum who want to defend free speech on campus and oppose the idea that the purpose of education is political conversion.

In an ideal world, one could well imagine some of the older academic organizations encouraging discussion about the place of politics in scholarship and teaching. In the humanities, particularly, where the idea of politicized teaching has been most strongly advocated, groups such as the Modern Language Association might devote special sessions of their annual gatherings to consideration of the ethics of using the classroom to achieve the political transformation of students. Scholarly groups might begin discipline-wide discussions of academic freedom and the threats that politics pose to it. But as eminent historian C. Vann Woodward has observed, the

groups one might look to for this kind of leadership have so far shown little inclination to provide it.[95] The American Association of University Professors, an organization founded to defend academic freedom, has had a particularly disappointing record. In July 1991, a special committee appointed by the president of the AAUP denounced the foes of "political correctness" in a statement declaring them to be sexist and racist:

> Their assault has involved sloganeering, name-calling, the irresponsible use of anecdotes, and not infrequently the assertion that "political correctness" is the new McCarthyism that is chilling the climate of debate on campus and subjecting political dissenters to the threat of reprisal. For all its self-righteous verve, this attack has frequently been less than candid about its actual origin, which appears to lie in an only partly concealed animosity toward equal opportunity and its first effects of modestly increasing the participation of women and racial and cultural minorities on campus.[96]

The AAUP action was subsequently denounced by a number of prominent academics, including six who have chaired the AAUP committee on academic freedom and tenure.[97] In a publication of the AAUP's California Conference, John Ellis of the University of California at Santa Cruz wrote:

> Association members who have spent years defending freedom of speech are deeply distressed to see the AAUP enter a legitimate national debate and attack one side as morally unworthy. The statement complains about the incautious use of the term "McCarthyism." Yet the authors use one of the Wisconsin Senator's favorite tactics: smearing opponents without providing any evidence to assess the truth of what is said. The attack on motivations not only runs directly counter to Association traditions, but also implies an understanding of the debate that is remarkably primitive: it suggests that

> colleagues and scholars such as James Barber, Eugene Genovese, Jacques Barzun, Irving Howe, Arthur Schlesinger and a host of others are motivated simply by prejudice, rather than by serious concerns about what is happening on campuses today.[98]

One would like to see the national leadership of organizations such as AAUP proceeding in an open-minded way; but when they do not, the fact that their failure creates dissent is a hopeful sign.

Some administrators have defended faculty members from attacks that have nothing to do with academic standards.

So, too, is the willingness of some administrators to defend faculty members from attacks that have nothing to do with academic standards. At Hampshire College in Massachusetts, Dean David Smith threatened to resign when he thought that the process for reviewing the reappointment of two faculty members had become politicized. Some of those voting against reappointment had cited such reasons as the failure of one professor to bring a "Third World challenge" to the European literature he was teaching and the fact that the other, who is Hispanic, had chosen not to participate in the college's Third World studies program. After a protracted struggle, both professors were reappointed.[99]

At Wesleyan University in Connecticut, President William Chace strongly defended a professor whom students charged with racism and sexism because of certain books the professor had chosen to teach in his religion classes. The professor, Jeremy Zwelling, wrote an open letter to Chace setting forth the incidents in detail and expressing his concern "that a free and open exchange of ideas is increasingly being threatened. . . . I have sometimes experienced the classroom as a forum for intimidation and threat, for menacing speech, the policing of thought, and attempts to censor assigned readings, often through a kind of self-righteous political posturing that will not allow itself to be challenged." Chace responded:

> The confrontations you describe in your letter are both shocking and depressing. The phenomenon of

> "political correctness" is apparently alive on the Wesleyan campus, and thus we take our place in the sad honor roll of other institutions that have allowed or even encouraged students and others, including faculty, to declare that, in the interest of rectifying social and cultural wrongs, certain ideas, books, expressions, and opinions may no longer legitimately be entertained in a classroom. Only that which reinforces or exalts a group is seen as appropriate.

Chace went on to challenge the Wesleyan community "to examine the degree to which we really are committed, as intellectual beings must be, to an open and wholly free inspection of the issues—particularly the *painful* issues, the ones that can divide and injure us—that truly comprise an education worth having."[100]

Alumni from Dartmouth, Mount Holyoke, and Princeton have formed groups to protect free speech and promote intellectual diversity on campuses.

In another hopeful development, alumni have begun to take interest in what is happening on campuses. James L. McFarlane, Jr., class of 1987 at Duke University, took out a large advertisement in the alumni magazine to urge his fellow Duke graduates to join him in an organization dedicated to "a Duke future where Western cultural values continue to flourish, where selection is based on merit, and where true diversity is the diversity of mind developed through open inquiry and debate rather than through 'sensitivity' indoctrination and censorship."[101] Lee Bass, class of 1979 at Yale, gave the university a $20 million gift to support a new elective course of studies in Western civilization, "a field," noted the *New York Times*, "that for more than a decade has been under attack."[102] Alumni from Dartmouth, Mount Holyoke, and Princeton have formed groups to protect free speech and promote intellectual diversity on campuses; and this, surely, is a trend to be encouraged.

In a new book, *Impostors in the Temple*, Martin Anderson of the Hoover Institution makes the important recommendation that college and university trustees become more

involved in what is happening on campuses. They have a great deal of power, he notes, but seldom use it:

> Usually the trustees, and they alone, hire and fire the president. They have fiduciary responsibility. They have the authority to set policies that deal with teaching and with research and publication. But they rarely use that authority; they do not exercise leadership.

One reason for this failure, Anderson speculates, is that trustees often feel intimidated by the intellectuals whose research and teaching is, after all, the business of higher education. "In these areas of intellectual endeavor," Anderson writes, "most trustees are babes in the woods."[103]

Just as members of corporate boards have begun to exert influence, so, too, can trustees of colleges and universities.

Trustees can learn, however. Just as members of corporate boards have begun to educate themselves and exert influence over the companies they oversee, so, too, can those who sit on the governing boards of colleges and universities. And surely there is important reason for them to do so. Seldom since colleges and universities began in this country have there been such fundamental questions asked about the mission of higher education. Seldom since the principles of academic freedom were first formulated has there been such an assault on their premises. Seldom has there been such a need on our campuses and in our country to affirm that we can transcend our differences and find common ground on which we can reason together.

Trustees are often people who have made their mark in law or business, journalism or philanthropy. They are not usually professional intellectuals, but that should not be seen as a disadvantage. Indeed, it can be an asset. As historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, another advocate of an increased role for trustees, points out, colleges and universities can become cut off from the concerns of the larger society, and one of the most important functions trustees can fill is to represent those concerns at the highest level.[104]

By doing so, trustees make clear that what happens on our campuses is of importance to all of us. Arguments about pursuing truth may seem esoteric, but they are not; and those who have lived in societies where the pursuit of truth has been subordinated to politics know this well. Because he was unwilling to follow Marxist ideology, philosopher and chemist Radim Palous was not permitted to be a university professor while his country, Czechoslovakia, was under a Communist regime. He worked as a coal stoker; and in the evenings, at great risk to himself and his students, he conducted "flat seminars," classes in his apartment where he taught without paying attention to Marxist orthodoxies.

Having to mold ideas to fit prescribed ideologies is demeaning to individuals and damaging to societies.

In a recent interview, Palous, now the rector of Charles University in Prague, was asked to describe the role of the university in a democracy. "To educate," he answered, "in the sense that Plato talked about: to draw students out from the dark to the light; to move from closure to openness, to an understanding of the truth—which is something that cannot be changed."

The interviewer observed that there are many on university campuses in the United States who hold a different view, who argue that truth doesn't exist, that only perspectives do, and that the role of scholars is simply to explore those different perspectives. To which Palous responded, "To be educated we must understand the truth. And that means literally to stand under it. It is above us, not we above it."[105]

Palous's words take on particular eloquence because of the price he has had to pay for living by them, but the price for not living by them can also be high. Having to mold ideas to fit prescribed ideologies is demeaning to individuals and damaging to societies. Being able to pursue the truth wherever it may lead is one of the blessings of liberty—and one of democracy's greatest strengths.

Acknowledgments

THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES has mandated that the National Endowment for the Humanities report on the state of the humanities on or before October 1, 1992. This document, concentrating specifically on higher education, together with a general statistical survey, are being presented in fulfillment of the congressional mandate.

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Members of the National Council on the Humanities in June 1992 were:

Aram Bakshian, Jr.
Michael T. Bass
Bruce D. Benson
Alvin H. Bernstein
Patrick Butler
Helen Gray Crawford
Edwin J. Delattre
Margaret Pace Duckett
Hillel G. Fradkin
Billie Davis Gaines
Mikiso Hane
Henry H. Higuera
Donald Kagan
David Lowenthal
Michael J. Malbin
Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.
Jon N. Moline
Paul J. Olscamp
Anne Paolucci
John Shelton Reed, Jr.
Peter Shaw
Robert B. Stevens
Kenny J. Williams
William P. Wright, Jr.

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